

# THE MENTORS

*Cha 7 from **LionWorld** by William E Justin*  
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It was early morning the following day. Coco and Robert decided to fly off from Southern California later then they had

originally planned. Big-E was scheduled to meet with Eric “Brick” Smith after lunch and the airport was along the way. It would be more convenient for him to drop off Coco, Robert and Randi and continue on in to Los Angeles.

Little B was excited. All his favorite people were there in the house. “The Goddess” Coco and “The Goddess” Randi. Plus, “The Other Dog Man” was there and “The Big Dog Man” too. They were all going “bye-bye”. Little B was told this by both “The Goddess” Coco and “The Goddess” Randi. He didn’t know just where they were going—maybe to that house where “The Goddess” Randi lived with “The Other Dog Man”. He liked that house. He got to spend the night in the bed there. At his own house, “The Big Dog Man” always took him outside and made him spend the night in “the luxury poodle dog bed” and he would miss the intoxicating scent of “The Goddess” and sometimes feel lonely.

As these thought-pictures ran through the mind of Little B, Coco focused her gaze on the little pet. “Little B” she said, “you go on outside and do your business—then we goin’ bye-bye”. She pointed with her arm outstretched toward the doggy-door at the rear of the kitchen where all of them were gathered. He *knew* what to do and automatically got up and ran out. He trotted around the house to a front-side gate, lifted his leg, and “did business” on a coiled-up water hose. This is where a “dog man pack” came every few days with their big machines. One of the “dog men” called him “little pâto blanco”. Once the man chased him with a strange machine that was very noisy and made wind. He had been afraid and ran into the house to look for “the Goddess” or “The Big Dog Man” but they were not at home so he had went upstairs to hide in the “luxury poodle-dog bed” until the “dog man pack” were gone. Ever since, whenever he heard their truck coming he would rush out to “do business” by the side gate where they came in. He would lift his leg and go on the garden hose or leave a pile right where they walked in. Even though he was afraid of this “dog man pack”, Little B wanted them to know he was a “good guard dog”.

After a clear, bright sunrise, fog was rolling down from a ridge above the house. Little B was struck by a wave of intoxicating scent he remembered very well. He looked around to catch site of “The Lion Man” but could only smell him. At the front of the yard he saw that the gate was wide open and he walked slowly to the boundary. He knew that even though the gate was open he was not allowed to go into the front yard alone. To do so would mean that he was “a bad dog” and Little B always wanted to be “a good dog”. So he didn’t cross the boundary but turned around to go back to the doggy-door at the kitchen. But before he rounded the corner a rapid staccato burst of little barks made him turn around and look. It was Chica—the little short-hair dog from down the street. She let another burst of tiny barks sound off and Little B saw her tall, pointed ears fall backwards like a bunny’s as her eyes sparkled. She turned around and moved her tail up some, then looked back at him and ran off.

Suddenly, Little B heard a voice that came from no particular direction and seemed embedded in the fog. “Go, little dog, the time is perfectly right!” Little B *knew* that this was “the Lion Man” that had spoken.

Instantly, he forgot about everything and charged after Chica. Little B ran past the gate without even noticing it. He forgot all about being “a good dog” or making “the goddess” angry. The only thought-picture in his mind was that of Chica. She had charged ahead and turned back to look at him. She sounded another rapid barrage of tiny barks and continued running down the center of the street with Little B in hot pursuit. At the opposite end of the quiet street was the house where Chica lived. She turned into some bushes when she reached the borderline of the seven-acre property that was completely fenced in from the sidewalk. Little B followed and came to a place where Chica had dug a narrow trench under the wrought-iron fence. As she waited for him on the other side, he fought to squeeze through. Little B was thicker then Chica. He followed

her into the house through a doggy door. She continued down a hallway to some stairs and up to a room next to the stairway. So did he. When he came into the room, Little B saw that Chica was up on a big bed with pillows. He jumped up there with her and more then at any other time in his life, *he knew what to do!*

Coco wondered where all the fog had come from. She had gone to look for her dog when he hadn't returned in the couple minutes she'd expected would be enough for him to do his business. They were running late now. She wanted to be on the Le Muffet business jet and in the air as early as possible. At the front-side gate she saw that it was open and held in place by a log from the bin of firewood next to it. She assumed it was the gardeners that were responsible for this even though later she would realize they weren't scheduled to come that day and that she hadn't heard their noisy mowers, edger's and blowers at all. She went back inside to gather the men for a search and quickly the four of them were out front. She suddenly had a flash of intuition and stormed off down the center of the street. "I know where he at" she announced angrily.

"That little bitch Chica probably in heat again and got her nasty smell all up in his nose!"

Robert, Randi and Big-E fanned out behind her looking for him on each side of the street while calling his name. Each wondered about the odd appearance of the fog, but Big-E was especially struck by it. Coco walked briskly, aware this incident would cause them to arrive late at the airport—and lateness now would increase as the airport filled with arrivals every moment. When she reached the front gate of the house at the opposite end of the street, she rang the buzzer. A voice answered to explain that the homeowners were away. Coco asked if the woman inside the house had possibly spotted her dog that had gone missing. "I did see something", said the woman—most likely the head housekeeper. "Wait one moment please". A few minutes later the front door opened and the housekeeper emerged holding Little B. There was a towel between her hand and the dog's bottom.

"I guess he came over to visit with Chica", the woman said with a deadpan expression, handing the load off to Coco. "You keep the towel. He seems to be a little wet underneath".

Coco felt humiliated and thanked the housekeeper for her help. Then she stormed back toward her own house quietly cursing Little B. "Bad, baaad dog" she hissed.

The men followed behind her quietly. Big-E and Robert looked at one another with fully muffled smiles on their faces. Randi, on the other hand, appeared almost devastated. He had planned to mate Little B with another adorable Malta-poodle dog named Lolita and hold a small ceremony in "the honeymoon booth" at his poodle-dog salon. But now the experience would be tainted for him. Little B looked like a picture of innocence lost. He didn't react at all to being repeatedly called "a bad dog". He was breathing with deep inhalations and his tongue hung outside one section of his mouth giving him a salacious appearance.

"Oh you think you a *conquistador* now you little mo-fukr", Coco said in a shrill but scalding burst. "But you gonna ride *all the way* to Australia in the damn bathroom!" Little B didn't react at all but continued to gaze off into the distance looking very pleased.

With all loaded into the *Asian Motors' Road Trip* van, Big-E went to close the side gate. He had been a bit spooked by the sudden appearance of the fog and was now trying to comprehend how the fire log had gotten from the neatly kept rack of wood and into a position where it could hold the gate open. He concluded that it had been placed there intentionally. Later when he reviewed the security camera files for that part of the house, he would see something very strange occur. The gate was closed as it normally was. Then a thick tuft of fog filled the area. When the fog had lessened and the gate was once again visible, it was wide open with the log holding it in place. Somebody *had* slipped in there intentionally. As he was preparing to rejoin the others, a voice sounded clearly and he couldn't say for sure if it had come from somewhere around him or even if it had come from inside his own head.

"At each junction I will be present until the match is complete".





It was faint, barely audible, but clear. He looked toward the rooftops of some homes in the distance. But then he couldn't say *where* it had come from or exactly just what he had heard. Perhaps a shred of conversation floating out of a house as someone was turned toward an open window. But his logical mind told him something else—that he was being stalked by someone. And he openly wondered to himself if that something or someone was *Ka-china*.. This episode seemed intrinsically linked to the one at Los Grotto de Mirilla Agua.

Big-E was very silent as the four made the fifty-mile drive to the airport. Coco and Robert were quietly running back through the strategy they had devised for their encounter at

*Aussie BP*. Robert saw his partner and oldest friend was trying her best to cover up a deep apprehension and at one point suggested to her that they could still call off the trip. Coco's eyes flashed with anger. "How can you say that! I'm no little girl. I thought you had my back Robert!" Her tone was brutal and she realized it and suddenly burst into tears.

"I know I'm being a bitch", she said and then really let out a long sob. Robert reached out from the back seat and put his hand on top of hers, which was resting on the center console. Big-E reached out and began to massage the high, soft point at the back of her neck. Little B—who had been consigned to ride in the luggage area at the back of the van jumped into Randi's lap and began to whimper. Hearing "The Goddess" cry always made him very sad. When Coco turned and looked at him he reached up with his front paws toward her and she instinctively gathered up him up and brought the lovable little pet into her arms. "Oh baby", she said through a final sob, "I'm sorry for being so mean. I know you just a dog".

The four of them gradually came into a more normal state and as they were pulling into to the airport, Maxim called from The Oakland. Big-E told him he was putting the call on the van's audio system so he could speak to all of them. He had arrived back in California the previous night, rented a car, and returned home on the *Bullet-Train Auto Carrier*. He made arrangements for a security detail he hired in Australia to be in place to guard Coco and the men from the moment they touched ground. Max knew the owner of the private security firm. The man was a strident anti-fascist and completely trustworthy. The company provided security whenever The Le Muffet Crew had Lion-fighting matches on the continent. He explained that he had left three street phones in the plane and how they should go about linking up with their security. They would have no physical contact with the guards who would be stalking them and watching out for any problems. For phone contact, they should address the guards as "Mate". They would address Coco as "Sheila" and Robert and Randi as "Mate". If any kind of problem occurred they were to dial the number in their phones associated with "Mate".

From the back seat, Randi asked what kind of problems he was referring to. "Max, what type of scenario do you see us in the middle of?" he asked somewhat warily. "We're not going to be in the middle of a gun fight are we?"

Everybody laughed out loud at this. "Naw", said Max on the speaker-phone. "Everythang gonna fall in place jus fine. Jus gonna be a *regular* meeting. If somebody stalking you or these people you trying to do business with, then they gonna get snagged....and we end up with a lot of information *the easy way*." This brought a little smile to Big-E. Coco and Robert turned their heads and gazed out their respective passenger-side windows. Randi—who had heard a few stories about how the Le Muffet family operated—wasn't quite sure what he meant by *the easy way*. He would ask Robert about that later. He felt very secure and excited about the trip, but part of him wished he could be back at his *Poodle Dog Salon* in Santa Barbara where only on a rare occasion did the little



Little dogs snap or bite.

Big-E parked the van and told Max he would call him later. This reminded Coco about what Sydney had told her the previous day; that the men were up to something. After her brother disconnected the call. She asked her husband about it in a casual way. Big-E gave her “that look” and pointed toward the airport terminal. She knew not to press him when he had that look. Coco would get the softer version of “The Big-E White Gaze”. The hard version was saved for Lions. It had been caught on video several times. If Coco’s oldest brother terrified Lions with his gaze, her husband could freeze many of them in their tracks with his. He possessed some strange ability to actually stop the internal dialogue in people as well, although that was something that rarely happened.

“You go and check in while I take care of the luggage.” Big-E walked until he found a porter. He told them where he’d parked and passed the van’s encrypted control code into their hand-held device and gave the porter a hundred dollar bill. Then he walked over to an outside security gate and started up a conversation with the guards whom he remembered from past trips. They chatted for twenty minutes until Coco, Robert and Randi appeared outside in the airfield walking toward the jet. Big-E asked the guards for a twenty minute pass so he could go say goodbye to his wife and they granted it. He jogged up and joined the three.

Randi was excited but apprehensive about air travel—especially on a smaller jet. As they preceded to their aircraft, Coco spotted his nervousness and grabbed Randi’s hand and speeded up. He was caught a bit off-balance as they accelerated past Robert and Big-E. “Randi, I want you to help me come up with some new colors and fabrics for the plane” she said. “It lookin’...dreary...and I bet you can help me inject it with some fresh dazzle.” Then she confided, “Maxi got this stupid old chair in there that ever’ body always want to sit in. Last time I flew... it stank! It really need to be reupholstered”

Robert was happy to see Coco back in a normal mood now but was bracing himself for the long ride half way around the globe. He had packed a few diversions such as playing cards. A three-way Gin-Rummy contest to a fifteen-hundred points would eat up at least five hours. They planned to have fresh food delivered during re-fueling in Argentina and then do some gourmet cooking. He figured he might be able to sleep for some hours and then Randi was going to lead them in Cristopian Meditation so that they might arrive in Australia without too much jet lag and be ready to go to work.

When Robert, Randi, and Little B disappeared into the jet, Big-E took Coco out of view and gathered her into his arms.

“We should *both* retire” he told her. “...never be apart”. He said this softly and she could see the pain in his eyes. There was always a moment when they had to say goodbye to each other for an extended period that she would see that pain in his eyes. It was the only time when he became fragile. Coco felt it must’ve stemmed from the day he’d last saw his mother alive. Sometimes it only lasted for a fleeting moment. At other times—like today—he actually looked like young boy. If she looked into his eyes at those times it would make her want to cry. So she just buried her head in his chest then kissed. “Call me when you reach Argentina” he told her.

With Coco on board the jet, Big-E began the long walk back to the van. He cleared his mind and began to think about Eric Smith. He had spoken to Max after he left Maui and they agreed to save their discussion of things until Coco was out of the picture. This had to be kept away from the women and Sydney already knew something was going on. Big-E told him that she had alerted Coco on that as well. “Yeah...right” said Max. “See, this is the problem with having only one wife. You end up telling the one wife so much that she gonna feel entitled to know *everything* all the time.”

Alone now, Big-E got Max on the phone again to find out just what Jimmy Luani had said about “Brick” Smith.

“Same as with us”, Max replied. Then he asked; “Hey, so what all you know about this guy over there named David?”

“Who?”. Big-E didn’t recognize the name. He had been to Maui only one time several years earlier. Coco had been there without him on five other occasions. He didn’t remember anything about a David.

“He a Hawaiian”, Max said. “A darker skin guy with some grey hair. He’s maybe sixty....”

“Oh, you mean the production manager” Big-E said. He’d met the man and Coco had spoken of him as well. “Coco says he’s a very nice guy”.

“Yeah...that’s just how Bill and Ronnie describe him, a nice older guy who manage all the workers.”

“He lives in a small house out back as I remember” Big-E said.

“Right”, Max replied. “Except he more then jus the plant manager. He *own the place*, oafy!”

“I thought Jimmy and Sydney did?”

“Naw, they jus like his...adopted children. It’s like that. He grew up there and then came to the mainland and

became a big-time lawyer. He's a known guy all over Manhattan City and The Columbia District. And get this....he *know* Brick Smith. He's sat in on a meeting with him once and had a chance to personally evaluate him. He said that Smith and his people want Vulerummer so bad that if it came down to saving one of us—or getting him—they'd sacrifice one or all of us!"

"Wow" Big-E said. He hadn't expected to hear anything like that. "So what does this David think about the fact that Smith was *playin'* the three of us?"

"He said that's how Smith is—a control freak. He indicated Smith made a stupid error with all that crap at the party."

"Right" Big-E said. "And that's the whole thing right there. Why do we want to get involved with a guy who's going up against the single most powerful man in the world....and makes stupid mistakes like that?"

"Exactly" Max replied. "Why would we? This thing flip around 'bout 180 degree since I first got involved. And there one more thing Big-E. This David told Jimmy and me stuff about you that you never mentioned to any of us."

There was a pause and then, "What kinda stuff?"

"He said you somethin' called *Washington Kachina*."

Another, longer pause by Big-E before he replied. "What? Naw! He said that? Listen Oafy, that's mostly just old bullshit".

"Ah ha" Max replied. He recognized the tone of voice Big-E used when he was trying to hide something. And Big-E recognized the tone of voice Max used when he didn't quite believe what he was saying.

"Listen, Oafy, I'll tell you all about that some other time. It don't amount to much but it gonna take some explaining and I got to start putting on my game face on for Smith".

"What time you scheduled to meet him?"

"Right after lunch" Big-E replied. Their meeting had been re-scheduled twice. Once by Big-E and once by Smith. He asked Max what this David's last name was.

"You know, I never asked." Max said. "I'm going over to talk to Dr. Ben in a little while and see what he knows. The old master probably know all about David and maybe about Smith too. I've been waitin' to talk to him about this "

"That's a great idea" Big-E replied.

Max laughed. "That's easy fo you to say. You don't gotta sit there and be the butt of his jokes. What are you gonna do until the meeting?"

"I'm headin' to Hollywood to close down my dad's apartment. He says he won't be back. That aunt of yours done something to him!".

"Yeah", Max said laughing. "I can hardly wait to find out what!"

Big-E arrived at Buster White's former residence about two hours prior to his meeting with Eric Smith. He had a key and let himself in. The place was as it had been the previous week before he'd come to Santa Barbara for the party. He was looking around at things when he saw a sliver of shadow appear outside the front entry. He opened the door before the person could knock and saw a teenage kid looking up at him. This was the one from upstairs whose mother had complained that Buster was smoking marijuana with her son.

"Buster said you'd be coming by" the kid said. "He's been sending me text messages from Brazil".

"Did he happen to say what he's doing there?"

The kid flashed a teenager's smile and replied that Big-E's dad had met a woman. "He really likes women!"

"Yeah, I know. Did he tell you anything else?"

"He said he's got something big going on and that if I come down there next summer he'd have a good job for me." That's what Buster had told Big-E as well during his call two days after the party. He asked the kid if he planned to take the old man up on his offer.

"Hell ya", said the kid enthusiastically. "I've been checking the place out on the Interweb. It's like a resort. Do you know what he's doing down there?" Big-E shook his head. "He wouldn't tell me over the phone." Then he shifted the subject to the business at hand; clearing out the apartment.

"He told me that if I gave you a thousand dollars you would get rid of all the stuff and send him his old navy trunk." The kid nodded affirmatively and gazed at Big-E with some expectation. Big-E reached into his pocket and pulled the wad of cash he had brought for that purpose and handed it to the kid. Then he smiled warmly and added ; "He told me I should come back and kick your ass if you ripped us off".

This brought a nervous, goofy look to the kid's face. "I wouldn't do *that*. Buster's my friend and besides, you're...fucking Big-E White".

Big-E looked into the kid's eyes and became reflective. He thought he'd try and teach him something very important. "No, Big-E White is what I *do*" he confided. "*Who* I am is something apart from that. More like *who* you are. You wouldn't rip yourself off, would you?"

"Well, no", the kid replied looking puzzled. He didn't exactly understand what Big-E had meant.

Big-E pointed over to a bong that was sitting on the coffee table in front of worn-out looking sofa. "Is that Buster's?" The kid said it was and that Buster liked to keep a buzz going most of the time.

"He wants you to mail him some weed, am I correct?"

"Yeah", the kid replied somewhat surprised to hear this. "He told me exactly how to do it and where to have it shipped".

Big-E shook his head and stared at the bong which was well-coated with resins. "Cristo, you'd think he could find some down there." The kid offered that Buster preferred a certain variety and that he had his own recipe for using it to make a special smoking mixture. Big-E considered whether he wanted to know just what that recipe entailed. He decided he didn't want to know.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" he asked the kid.

"I go enough to get the credits I need to graduate" he replied.

"Don't you want to go to college?"

"I want to go to Brazil" the kid said with a wry smile that reminded Big-E of Buster.

Robert Casoni was an expert at card games. His excellent memory provided him with a heightened ability to file away the cards that became visible and deduce the probabilities of those that might appear next. As he was a humble, empathetic man, competitors constantly underrated him. Few saw the powerfully perceptive mind behind the sunny persona he naturally projected. He could force people's attention like a good magician or distract them without being seen as a distraction. And he had a sense that his always present feeling of good fortune would somehow make the right cards come to him.

His greatest experience playing cards had won him a mere dollar and fifty cents in a penny ante game of five card draw poker he once played with a couple of friends. It was his turn to deal and he had called "sevens wild". After a thorough shuffle he dealt the cards and then picked up his own to see what he had. He had legally dealt himself four "sevens" and an "ace". That could be played either as five-of-a-kind or a royal flush. One of his friends called it "a magical hand". But for Robert there was nothing magical in the universe except its very existence. *Everything* was "magical" but it was logic, reason and scientific modes that made it available.

He had come from a poor family in Tanzania and self-educated himself. His bright light drew help from everything around him and now at the age of thirty, he was accomplished, successful and well-regarded. Coco was his star and Randi had unlocked his heart and soul. He felt happy now to be flying high above the Pacific ocean with the two people he cared most about in the world. Even if they were flying into an uncertainty that could ultimately bring them a defeat. Getting Coco's product properly launched was something he felt he had successfully completed. This intervention by Fascists had staggered him but now he was eagerly anticipating *his* turn at bat. His feeling of good fortune was present and strong as ever.

The fresh pack of cards was wrapped tightly in clear plastic and Robert directed one of his well-manicured finger nails to a position where he could easily break the seal. He always left his right thumbnail a tad long and kept it sharpened like a good pocket knife. He slit the pack open and announced that the first game would be himself versus Coco. Then Randi would face Coco. Then he would play Randi. "Then I'll play the one of you who is left".

"Oh, listen to you" said Coco who was warmed by his confidence. She pulled up a small plastic crate to sit in the aisle and act as a card table.

"He cheats", cautioned Randi.

"Yeah, but always *just* within the rules" Coco replied.

Randi had a seat next to Robert and now placed his hand at the junction of his lover's shoulder and neck. "I'll level things by sneaking peeks at his cards and flash you signals when he isn't watching". He petted Robert's back and said, "I always know when he isn't looking".

Meanwhile, Little B was fast asleep in Maxim's recliner at the rear of the jet. He was dreaming about

“The Lion Man” and about “the good-dog time” he had at Chica’s house.

Eric “Brick” Smith wasn’t as fortunate as Little B. There would be no nap for him today. He sat behind his desk at World Security Regional headquarters in Los Angeles waiting for Big-E White to make his appearance. Keri Branghaue was beside him entertaining their other special guest when Smith’s phone rang. “He’s here Brick, shall I send him up?” Smith thought about making him wait for a minute. “Yes...but Larry, have a couple guys smack him in the head a few times in the elevator”. They laughed. Smith and Branghaue’s other guest smiled as well.

Out of the corner of his eye Big-E watched the agent accompanying him to Smith’s office. He felt serene now. The worry and violence he’d been feeling had gone out of him the previous night when he was able to sneak about his house away from Coco’s view and search for listening devices. He had brought back an electronic transmission detector supplied to him by Max when he returned from The Oakland. Big-E had decided that if he found any “bugs” in his bedroom he would sever his relationship with Smith. He would execute a specific batch of commands through a street phone, then shake Smith’s hand to bid him farewell. Then he would snap Smith’s wrist—either by slamming it against the edge of his desk or against his free hand. He had thought for sure that Smith had had his house bugged. When it turned out not to be true, Big-E felt a great relief. He hadn’t been sure he would survive such a negative encounter. He could’ve easily broken Smith’s wrist as payment for such a foolish act of betrayal—and show him the noose he had put around his neck—but he wasn’t sure he could get out of the World Security building in piece. He was now ready for his other plan—to allow an explanation by Smith and Branghaue of their strange solicitation of him, Max and Jimmy.

The Level One World Security commander and his assistant stood at the entry to greet him when he stepped in. Through a site line between their bodies Big-E spotted the third person in the room he had just entered. The slender and handsome older man was beaming at him, his eyes glittering at the site of his greatest student, one he hadn’t seen in several years. Big-E had been thinking of Paul Cavalet a lot that day. Keri Branghaue watched to see if a look of surprise appeared on Big-E’s face but none did. In his mind, he was thinking about how interesting it was that Paul should appear on a day when he was thinking about him so much. In the other part of his mind Big-E was re-calculating the event at hand. Having his mentor in the room meant Smith and Branghaue could be accredited with a fresh supply of trustworthiness.

All of this took place in two or three seconds and soon Paul rose to his feet and came over to Big-E with a warm embrace and everybody took their seats. Kerri Branghaue began by apologizing to Big-E for her phone call to him at the party.

“We felt we needed to let you know we are here with you”, she said in an almost tender way—giving the impression Smith and her were only acting as gentle protectors. Big-E wanted to laugh out loud and tell her point blank to spare him the bullshit. But Paul’s presence in the room prevented this. He had never allowed any of his students to go at one another or other people in such a way. Courtesy was practiced as an energy-saving device. It naturally enhanced one’s edge when it was truly internalized—rather than being worn merely as a social accessory.

“I appreciate that”, Big-E said politely. It was difficult for him to feel any real gratitude in being stalked in his own house. He further explained how they had made a mistake in their actions and by not informing Max, Jimmy and himself about their doings. He looked directly at Smith and lowered his gaze. “I’m afraid the three of us have been left feeling very insecure by this”.

Big-E had delivered this to Smith as softly as was possible but as Kerri Branghaue understood, Eric was a proud man who’d come up the hard way, had reach the top of his profession, and was no longer used to suffering stinging rebukes. As softly as Big-E had done it, still, he had put his hand around Brick Smith’s throat and squeezed it just enough to let him know that he regarded his actions as being completely misguided. From Big-E White’s standpoint, when a guy of Smith’s stature made a dumb mistakes, millions of people were often put in the position of having to pay the price; and people at the position of the World Security Level One agent never owned up to this.

Kerri Branghaue spoke up to intervene on behave of her boss but Brick Smith stopped her with a quick gesture of his hand. His mouth became slightly disheveled, shaped like a crooked W. He had been stung by Big-E White’s verdict but he was ready for it.

“We’ve sat in this office on two other occasions Big-E. Both times I’ve told you things that only a small

group of people in this world know about. I've trusted you with knowledge our enemies would use to harm a lot of good people. The Fascists would terrorize and kill people's children like they were ants." He let this point sink in. "Ethan Vulerummer is by far the *greatest security threat that mankind has ever known*. You and your friends have become critical parts in what might be the only real opportunity we might get to destroy The Seven Lions organization before it can lock us out. We need you Big-E, but we also need to have you under our complete control."

Big-E didn't respond. He didn't move. His eyes didn't even move. His stillness was profound and Paul Cavalet saw this and winced. Brick Smith had used the wrong words when he said *under our complete control*. As a teenager, Paul had taught Big-E how to cede control—especially to him. Now the naturally violent and dynamic Lion-fighter ceded control to people all of the time; to his wife, to his management people, to his teammates. He ceded control as long as people played by The Rules *he knew* to be correct. Just *trying* to get Big-E under complete control was apt to cause him to lock down like a real pit bull on your arm. And once a real pit bull has locked down on your arm there is little anyone other than the dog's master can do to get him to ease up. You could sever the head from the body of such a dog and would still have the dog's head locked down on your arm! Smith and Branghaue didn't know Big-E White very well at all despite all of the research they'd done. This was why they had brought in Paul Cavalet. Paul knew he should say something at this point and chose a particular tact.

"Excuse me", he said, pointing his chin toward Smith and Branghaue, "I realize I don't know all that much about this, but I'm wondering why Vulerummer and The Seven Lions organization has become such a threat. Even if you're successful and destroy them, wouldn't the void be filled by the crime syndicates or other business Fascists? Won't you just end-up a new version of the same crap to worry about."

Kerri Branghaue explained that the crime syndicates never crossed the line. They were effectively de-clawed. They were more like ordinary businessmen who paid their taxes and never considered challenging World Security. On the other hand, Fascism—as an ideology—was facing a situation where it could put its minions in full control of the political landscape for generations to come. Or it could be collapsed into something more like a loosely grouped pack of fringe lion.

"What it has come down to is this" she said, "We are battling them for possession of *the thumb in the hand of information control*. That's what we call it, *The Thumb*. Possession of the vast information systems is ultimately governed by control of *The Thumb*."

She explained that right now there was no real central control of the information systems. People's movements, their purchases, their relationships to everything were constantly being logged into the various data storage centers that ran across digital systems world-wide. As needed, people can access that information. Organizations such as World Security and The Seven Lions have special access. Say a Fascist's son rapes a girl. A wealthy, well connected person could get inside those information systems and have false evidence implanted that would exonerate the guilty. Or true evidence could be scuttled for the same purpose.

"It goes on and on", she said. "There are just so many ways to exploit the information systems. But when control of those systems are locked down and ran by a *living law*, then regulation of the controlling system becomes based on decisions made by the people, the legislators, the judiciary—and not by a select few that have garnered Fascist control. It will come to the point where you can violate speeding laws for instance, and that the information systems will send you a notice that you must pay a fine for doing so. But it could also be set to send you a notice only if your speeding actually proved harmful to other motorists or the public at large. If Fascists control that system, then *you'll* pay a fine whenever it benefits *them* and they will get a premium deal.

"But that's too simplistic an example to really show you what's at stake. The controlling system is one that captures all data bits from the smaller systems and outputs it into a batch of data carriers that monitor the entire system for tampering by insiders."

"Insiders such as World Security" Paul asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes", Kerri replied. "That too. But we are content to access information systems only for our purpose of creating security that the people agree is just. The Fascist have another view. They believe in 'all the justice you can afford'."

"That's only the long-term problem", Smith added. "Right now Fascist control of the systems is already being used to quell intelligent expansion into the wildlands. We've got people dying from a lack of health care so the rich can take more 5-star tropical vacations. Instead, resources could be used *from the ground up* to raise the standard of living for all people. But this would mean a lessening of control by those who now hold sway.



Less indentured servants available to wipe the candy asses of the rich with the five-star toilet paper they now enjoy!" Smith finished this and glanced quickly over at Big-E.

Still addressing Paul Cavalet—who hadn't yet heard this speech—Brick Smith continued, seeming to gain momentum with each declaration. "Have you noticed the increase of people living in subway carriers and out on the fringes in tent cities and the growing number of kids who lack normal education because every reasonable proposal that threatens Fascist control is stalled? Well, Vulerummer and the Seven Lions have a big, long-term *final solution* for this. As they are able to gain more and more control over the information systems, they'll be able to cover their tracks in order to gradually eliminate the people who don't turn a profit."

Paul slowly shook his head, wincing and smiling at the same time. "You paint a dreary picture here! So you guys *aren't* out to seize all of the Fascist control so you run things yourselves?"

"World Security advocates democratic principles", Kerri Branghaue answered passionately. "We *constantly* tell the public to donate a few hours a week of TV time to work online in the Government By The People Project." This was a worldwide online group open to the public that got people involved in searching for the right laws and regulations for things requiring the agreement of all people. The various work groups and subcommittees were involved in all areas of law and regulation : security; infrastructure, health, education, social welfare; insurance.

Some standards—and the exact terms under which they should exist—were carved into stone as a hedge against corrupt public officials and their private sector cohorts, who would over-write reasonable laws so they could accomplish undue personal gain. Other potential standards were locked up in ongoing public debate.

Votes were held at all times on various key points to fairly measure public opinion. In order to have status to vote on a point, one had to demonstrate a very basic proficiency in the chosen subject and be registered. Voted-on issues could be overridden as well by larger votes and further discussion. Politics were kept out of all of the work of those who signed up for the Government By The People Project. This group didn't actually write binding laws but hoped to provide a hotbed of reasonable, non-political action from which intelligent laws and elected officials could rise up. Most people were still content with cartoon TV political entertainment shows viewed on each side of the seemingly endless streams of commercials. The Government By The People Project however continued to hold hope that average citizens would build a system of law regulation that would finally retire the professional politicians and needless government bureaucrats. The idea in brief was like that of an old fashioned barn-raising where the community came together in an orderly fashion to build their government from the ground up. The Fascists *hated* all of this using the slogan, Ruled By Robot, hoping to manipulate the public into seeing this in a negative light. They took steps to undermine it but one of the key subcommittees in the GBPP had to do with building anti-fascist firewalls to protect the work.

Big-E wondered how much of Kerri Branghaue's cheerleading for the GBPP was delivered to get him back on their side. He had a question and changed the subject. He asked Smith if he had made progress set up the Lion-fighting match with Ethan Vulerummer.

"He wants to do it", Smith said. "The Seven Lions organization wants him to announce an 'exploratory committee' for a US presidential run. Everybody knows he can't win or even get the vote close enough to trigger a 'flip-circuit victory' with the voting machines. But they want the extra influence they think they can get. The staged Lion-fight would raise his profile. And it's a lifelong dream of his to be in one—even if it's mostly phony. So it should be just a matter of scheduling it."

V Corp—Ethan Vulerummer's world media conglomerate—had already contacted Big-E White's management. Smith said they had agents inside V Corp that introduced the possibility of a Lion-fight to coincide with the induction of the "Portrait of the Lion-fighters" at the National Museum in Colombia District. The idea was a winner and so Maxim Le Muffet and Jimmy "Samoan" Luani would be courted as well to serve as props for Vulerummer.

The problem for Smith and World Security wasn't getting Vulerummer out into the open for the Lion-fight, but gaining a numerical advantage over his security team. Having such an advantage meant the chairman of The Seven Lions Organization wouldn't survive the match. Not having such an advantage meant there would be no attempt to eliminate him at that time. Smith had explained to Big-E from the beginning that while they were always trying to get agents inside of V Corp, the odds were that the exhibition Lion-fighting match would only be that—a normal event. What World Security needed to accomplish its aim was a chain of events triggered by the elimination of Vulerummer. Anything other than a "clean kill" wouldn't provide the effect required to cripple the Fascist Party. They had to get in a position to attract all of the cards they needed to execute their larger plan.

Aboard the Le Muffet jet, Robert Casoni had drawn and played all of the right cards. He had closed out Coco in the final round of their three-way gin-rummy match. Randi gently came to his side and wrapped his right arm over Roberts shoulder. "Mr. Scrumptious always wins!" he said knowingly. Coco looked up and flashed a big smile.

"Mr. Scrumptious?" she said, looking at Robert, "ahhh...". Her voice became more dear, "Mr. Scrumptious!"

"Yes". Randi said this in a soft tone as he proudly patted his mate. Casoni's eyes rolled back. He made a mental note never to let Coco and Randi be together with him in a situation that demanded seriousness. He could see they wouldn't be able to constrain themselves from embarrassing him.

Coco went and sat down in Maxim's recliner at the rear of the plane and opened up the laptop she had given Randi to work on earlier. She had inserted the 3d design schematic for the jet's interior and put him to the task of remodeling it. All the various elements of the interior were set to edit and she showed him the different lists for coverings, accessories and colors. He came up the aisle and hovered over her as she looked at what he'd done. He'd chosen a new synthetic fabric called Feather-Leather to re-upholster all of the seats with. "They say it's 'tough as the road and soft as a bunny'" Randi said, mocking the copy writer. "Have you ever seen any?"

Coco said she hadn't. She clicked over to a product data page and saw it was rated at about 60% of the standard upholstery in the plane in terms of durability. The cost over time for Feather-Leather would be too high. "Anna Jamison will never go for it".

"Who's she?" asked Randi, and Coco explained that she was the Le Muffet cost controller. "Can't you talk to your sister-in-law?" Randi probed.

"Marthia the reason Anna Jamison so tight", Coco said as she read various reviews of the material. Robert added that Max had had to fight with his wife for a year before she'd agree to getting the jet in the first place. "She always been frugal", Coco continued. "Marthia prefer plain over fancy. Now she's 'True Cristopian'".

Randi heard this and it made his upper body tilt some. He silently rebuked himself. There was a conflict in him between his desire to walk a Cristopian path and his natural love for flair and extravagance.

Coco heard herself utter the words True Cristopian and was suddenly reminded why they were there in the first place heading to Australia to meet with *Aussie BP*. Robert and her believed it was the "True Cristopian" fringe that was somehow being used to oppose them. They didn't think it was possible for them to terrorize the people at *Aussie BP*—that was out of their league. The real power behind this attack was amoral, sociopathic, corporate Fascists.

She told Randi that the extra swivel seats he added to the interior of the plane was the most important thing. The jet had come with only two—which they had used for their card game. She said she thought they could get two or four more. She told him she really liked his color selection and choice of adding a divider so they could make a darkened sleeping section for the rear seats. Suddenly she wondered what had become of Little B.

"Baby" she called, "where you at?". A moment later the little pet emerged from the cockpit. He'd been sitting in the co-pilot seat next to "the nice dog-man". He was looking out the window watching for lions and "bad dog men". He was being a "good guard-dog". He trotted down the aisle and jumped up on a seat next to her and waited for "the Goddess" to put the laptop away so he could join her in the big seat that had fresh, "dog-man butt smell".

But Randi suddenly grabbed Little B saying it was time for him to "do his business" in the bathroom. He carried him to a box they had prepared with torn-up paper. Then he closed the bathroom door. Little B sniffed about looking for the right place. He knew that "a good dog" didn't just do "business" anywhere.

In The Oakland, Max had gone to talk to Dr. Ben Akiyama. He explained the situation with Eric Smith to him. He asked Akiyama if he thought they could trust the regional commander. "In a word, no" Akiyama said. "Those phone calls to you guys at the party was a true lapse of strategy. It's very hard to believe a Level One Agent would make such a poor decision."

Next, Max told him about his trip to Maui the previous day. He mentioned David, and what he had said about it—that Smith was a control freak.. Dr. Ben shrugged. "That sounds correct. Max, if I were you, I wouldn't be seen going in to that World Security building in L.A. You're on Ethan Vulerummer's radar. If his analysts pick up that you have been there, and their boss suspects you are in with his enemies...". Dr. Ben didn't finish the sentence. Instead he made the classic cut-throat gesture with his right hand.

Max reacted to this alarmingly. He told his mentor how Big-E had gone in there. "Big-E's different" said Akiyama. "He doesn't stop to sign autographs like you or stop to talk with the ladies. I was watching him at the

party the other day. He moves through the 'shadow lanes' even in his own house. I'd bet he doesn't enter the World Security building through the front door. Even still, I'd advise him to avoid that place as well. All it takes is one person going on-line; 'I just saw Maxim Le Muffet at World Security in L.A.—I bet he has an extra large dick!'. Dr. Ben laughed at his own joke. "All of this computer chat leaves trails that a good analyst can pick up in a second".

"What you think of this David?" Max asked. He told him about what the man had said of Big-E being part of a mysterious secret society called *Washington Kachina*. Akiyama hadn't heard of anything about David. He said he was obviously "one of the mentors". He was fascinated with the information about Big-E and the fact that he kept all of this hidden. Then he remembered a mental note to himself that he had made a few minutes earlier when he let Max in at the front entry. A pair of shoes sitting by the front door had been tossed by something. One of them had tumbled off the porch and into the garden. The other shoe was hanging over the edge.

"Is there anything else you're not telling me?" he asked Max.

"Naw....". Then he thought of something he *hadn't* talked about with the old master. He told him about The Little B Incident from the final Lion-fight a month before. As he listened attentively to the story, Dr. Ben's face filled with shadow and his demeanor became almost grave. "That is something from beyond the laws of physics" he said. "That little dog could not have accomplished such a thing."

Max said that he had. "I saw the video footage of it" he said. "All a sudden, here come Little B, flyin' in and he hit the backside of the lion. A second later and he's runnin' away and there blood all over. Naw, it happened *for reals!*"

Akiyama just sat there shaking his head. "Anything else you haven't told me?". Max shook his head. "That's all I know".

At World Security Regional Headquarters in L.A., "Brick" Smith wasn't feeling any sense of fascination at all with Big-E White. His upper lip was curled up revealing a section of un-straightened teeth. The Lion-fighter and his mentor had left their office three minutes earlier and Smith was releasing the bottled up heat from the final moments of their encounter.

"I thought that went very well" Kerri Branghaue said, trying to console her boss. She'd never seen him openly rebuked before and it left her feeling awkward.

"That guy's an asshole", Smith growled. "Another arrogant celebrity asshole with way too much money. We go to all of this trouble and patiently explain our position to him. We *demonstrate* our sincerity. And he tells us that if Vulerummer is willing to pay him a million dollar fee...that *he'll think about it!*" He looked liked he was on the verge of spitting out something really nasty from his mouth.

Branghaue offered her appraisal; "I think he'll be there if everything else sets up right. He asked you if we had made progress in trying to gain an advantage over Vulerummer's security. When you said we had, his body bounced a little bit in his chair. Part of him *wants* to participate. He'll jump at the chance even he can't get the whole fee or if he no longer fully trusts us."

"I didn't see that", Smith replied flatly. "His basic demeanor is plain and expressionless. When he's not trying to charm you, he reverts to that. His buddy Cavalet is the same way. They're peas in a pod. That's a Native American thing. They just sit back and it looks like they're trying to decide whether to scalp you or not."

"You shouldn't meet his gaze straight on", Kerri said. "It's better to look away when he tries to stare you down". She had watched Smith freeze up when Big-E slowly raised his chin and fastened his eyes on him when he asked if they were all on the same page.

"I'm just concerned that we don't have all of our ducks in a row" Big-E had answered him. He let Eric know with great subtlety that he was still questioning his competency. And Smith understood that immediately and was at a loss. Then Big-E had glanced at her and she couldn't help but look back even though it was like looking at the hot, ultraviolet light emitted by a welder. Big-E White's eyes had flickered and she realized he had scanned her like an x-ray machine.

"I'll tell you something you didn't catch about the guy", Smith said. "When you turned to grab that folder on the credenza, and bent over, he was infatuated. You could have him eating out of the palm of your hand if you wanted."

Kerri looked at him with neither an expression of being flattered, or of aversion. "I'm not trained for that sort of thing".

Even if she were, Smith wouldn't have considered putting her into close proximity with Big-E White. She was like a prized daughter and the pride of World Security. In Eric's estimation, when all was washed away, Big-E, despite his cleverness, was merely a polished brute.

For Paul Cavalet, Kerri Branghaue was the highlight of the interesting meeting at World Security. She had managed to find him through one of his students, and get his phone number. That was not an easy thing to do but the student had been no match for her. There was an attractive lilt in her sweet but no-nonsense voice. They wanted him to sit in and keep an eye on Big-E. Paul no longer felt Big-E needed anybody to watch over him but had agreed to come mostly because he was interested in *her*. As a horse breeder, he had reached a point where there were "the average ones" and "the exceptional ones" and he now looked at people and horses in the same way. When he met her in person her exceptional traits were obvious to him. He thought that it was an odd quirk of fate that she had not ended up as one of his students. And she was perfectly suited to be the perfect mate for his most prized student. But things don't always fall into the natural leys and he doubted he would ever see her again. And that was that.

Big-E and Paul decided to go have lunch at a Latin restaurant that was well known for its stuffed peppers served amidst rich, tangy *Califia Sauce* made from goat cheese, butter and wine. Cavalet would give Big-E his impression of the situation.

"That guy can get you killed", he said of Eric Smith. He told him that Level One agents were notorious for the mental mantle of supremacy they became accustomed to. "He won't or can't admit his mistakes and it's clear he doesn't understand you in the least but goes on surface impressions. Those are poor traits. Calling me in to help them was *another* mistake. The way he describes it, he'll be the one who pulls the trigger on Vulerummer if everything sets up right. Personally Big-E, I'd say stay as far away from there as you can!"

Big-E explained to Paul that there were some things he hadn't yet had the chance to tell him. Then he recounted all of the strange events that had been taking place beginning with 'the Little B Incident'. He told him about everything that had taken place at Los Grotto de Mirilla Agua and about the fog and voice he had thought he heard. Cavalet slowly fell back in his seat. If anybody other than Big-E had told him such a thing he would've laughed in their face. After a long moment he finally responded telling him in a low voice that he had never heard of such a thing.

"But isn't this what you call a 'Kachina moment'?" Big-E asked. This was a phrase that Paul had introduced him to as part of his training. A moment when time seems to slow down and all of the elements in the particular episode come into clear view. In regular time, moments pass so quickly that one could only grasp a few things. For Big-E, Kachina moments happened all of the time during his Lion-fighting matches. He would eventually meet up with the alpha male lion and seem to have a long period to choose his plan of attack or to avoid a charge by the wild beast. These moments went by in the wink of an eye but seemed to last a long time. What he was experiencing with all of these unusual events building into a larger pattern was a Kachina moment on an enlarged scale—which was something Paul had talked about as well.

"It is", Cavalet said simply and then read Big-E's mind. "So you feel it's all related to this attempt to get Vulerummer? That, somehow it's your fate, and the fate of your friends to be involved in that?"

"That's how it appears to me", Big-E said.

Paul looked at him quizzically. "So why are you going to charge Vulerummer a million dollars for your involvement?"

Big-E said that it wasn't because he wanted or needed Vulerummer's money. "It's a test. If the guy is willing to spend one or two or three million dollars for such stupid shit, well, it proves his negative quality beyond any shadow of a doubt. And that gives me extra purpose."

"Money like that is nothing for Vulerummer. He has more of it than anyone in the world. I don't quite get your point."

"I'm sure he's a prudent man", Big-E replied. "Just because he has it doesn't mean he'll spend it like that. He may feel insulted and take another path. No, it's *my* test for him."

"Won't all of the Lion-fighting fans then think of you as a sell-out?"

"I'll just give the money to charity. Besides, I'm finished with Lion-fighting. I should be dead Paul! The Lion was a half-second away from tearing up my throat when Little B struck. That *was* the end of my career. All that's left now is maybe this cartoon match with Vulerummer."

For Cavalet, this was one of the strangest things he'd ever heard before. Plus, it was something he was hearing



from the horse's mouth. The final part—that Big-E was done with Lion-fighting—was like a burst of sunlight. He was glad to hear it and told him so. A smile came on his face. The handsomely rugged man whose once golden hair had faded to a gray, sandy color suddenly looked perfectly tranquil. He told his student that it was time for him to chose a 'down-training' regimen. He inquired into the current training methods Big-E currently used and asked him about how his meditation was coming along.

Big-E told him everything. About his meditation, all he said was; "there seems to be nothing left for me to advance to other then popping the cork. And I'm much too young for that."

The two sat in the restaurant for several hours and talked about various down-training strategies. Paul said that his own down-training amounted to actual "horse play". He would go out in the corral and play tag with the young horses every day. Meditation for him was now part of each new moment no matter what he was doing.

After driving Paul Cavalet to the airport, Big-E headed home. He talked to Max on the phone and told him how everything had gone. He said his personal plan was to wait and see if V Corp would pay a million for his appearance. He suggested to Max that he and Jimmy use the same figure. V Corp could put it on TV as it wished. They could own all of the rights. He also told him Smith had claimed to have made progress at getting an open window to set up Vulerummer but that it still didn't look as if they would have a real shot at him. Then he told him about how they had sprung Paul Cavalet on him—and that Paul had told him to avoid Smith altogether. Max replied that Dr. Ben had said the exact same thing and counseled them both not to be seen at World Security in L.A.

Max was very satisfied with all of this. He told Big-E that they should pretty much act as if they had never met "Brick" Smith and just conduct business in their usual way. If an exhibition Lion-fighting match came to be, they could conceivably just approach it normally without any further knowledge about whether World Security would take Vulerummer out or not. He said he personally had no doubts that a World Security team could nail their target without getting any of them. His question was whether or not Smith would have them killed as well to silence them in the aftermath of the hit.

Big-E said he didn't think so. "Consider all of the information we have about this", he said. "Killing us would only bring on the thing it was suppose to silence. It makes no sense. Especially since we're on their side. Plus Max, they're not bad people and World Security sees collateral damage as failure. They hate it. They see themselves as surgeons, not butchers. I think we'd be in good hands with them." Inwardly, Big-E was feeling very happy. He was getting a lot accomplished with this phone call. He continued.

"Oafy, did you tell Dr. Ben about the Little B Incident?". There was a pause before Max confessed he had—that Akiyama had pressed him for all the information. He said he thought it was important to let him in on it. Big-E was happy to hear this. Inwardly, his excitement swelled. "Oafy, tell me *exactly* what you told Dr. Ben."

"I said that Little B had hit the Lion fast and that there was blood everywhere. He didn't quite believe it so I told him we had it on video and that it went down jus like that".

"Well good" Big-E replied, "We shouldn't ever keep Dr. Ben away from anything really big."

"So Big-E, tell me about this *Washington Kachina* stuff."

"Oh, that" he replied. "It's like I said Oafy, it don't amount to much of anything. When Paul was being trained as a young man, his teacher would take him around to meet various guys. Then, he did the same with me. It's just people checking out people and sometimes exchanging little stories. It supposedly goes back about a hundred-and-sixty-years. It's sort of like a car club where people show other people their rides and talk about cars."

"And nobody ever callin', askin' fo favors?"

"Once in a blue moon. All these guys I happened to meet don't need no favors. They're loaded. They can get just about anything they want. And the rest of them—guys like Paul—they don't want nothing or need anyone for anything."

"So why it so secret then?"

Big-E had to think about that a little. "Well, it really isn't. This David apparently knows all about. I guess it comes down to being told about it. There are no get-togethers or anything like that. There is no induction ceremony. I guess to be *Washington Kachina* means that you've heard about it from *Washington Kachina*." He laughed. "So now you *Washington Kachina* too oafy!"

"But I don't get no plaque, no certificate or any trophies?"

"Nottin'" Big-E said using a little slang.

"Good", Max replied. "I got enough of that shit as it is!"

When the two finished talking, Big-E was very happy. Everything had fallen into place perfectly. He rolled down the window and tossed his phone out. It hit the roadway and shattered into several pieces. "God is great",

he said to himself.

About twenty minutes later, Kerri Branghaue came into “Brick” Smith’s office with a big smile on her face. She held a transcript of the call between Big-E White and Maxim Le Muffet. He went through it, offering; “Those guys aren’t so bad....smarter then they appear.” He asked her to try and get her hands on a copy of that video with the dog. “I’d like to see that”, he said.

Big-E went back to his house in Santa Barbara and settled into his office. Coco called. She was in Argentina having completed the first leg of their journey. She told him about the gin-rummy game with Robert and Randi; about making plans for re-decorating the Le Muffet jet and how they had ordered a bunch of groceries and were going cook up something special before going to sleep. He told her how it had been a nice day in Southern California and about going to close down Buster’s apartment in Hollywood. Then he told her how much he already missed her.

“I left you a little gift, baby”, Coco said through the phone from thousands of miles away. She said sweetly that after her bath the previous night, while she was painting her nails, she had made him a video he could play with. “I always worry that you’ll forget me when I’m away” she added.

“Oh...I thought I heard something going on. You were in there for a while.”

“That was jus me thinkin’ ‘bout you...”. She said she was going to put the phone up because just hearing his voice was making her think of him.

He decided not to go and watch the video. He’d save that. He sat in his office chair for hours and became very quiet.

Earlier that day in Paris, Jean D’Soul had received a call from Robert Casoni. He explained to her what had been taking place with *Aussie BP* and how they were rushing down under to Australia to take the bull by the horns so-to-speak. Coco, Robert said, had been coming un-glued by the Fascist attack against them. He was worried she would do something they would regret later. He had called to ask for her advise.

Jean instantly told him not to tell her of this call. She would immediately get to the airport and meet them at the offices of *Aussie BP* if that was possible. She had flown there from Paris many times and thought she might have a chance to arrive in advance of them. She quickly made arrangements for the long trip. Her little Coco needed her now, she thought to herself. Coco was as willful as she was brilliant and had never experienced anything as serious as *this* before. If God was willing she would beat them there and take control of the situation. Coco wouldn’t stand for this if she fund out. She was always intent on proving to the world that she was her own woman, and if fact, the boss. Fashion industry insiders had continued to appraise her as a wealthy, neo-celebrity fringe designer despite her modest successes that were born of hard work.

The Fascist interference in this business deal between Le Muffet and *Aussie BP* was mysterious. Jean couldn’t tell if it was politically motivated or simply an attempt by somebody to stall her long enough to put a knock-off product in the market place. Several years earlier Coco had shown her what she was working on. It was something nobody had thought of before—a casual-wear product collection designed for a certain type of woman. At first Jean didn’t think they could find a market for the product. She didn’t think there would be sufficient numbers of women available to bring it to the initial profit needed to allow it to catch on and grow. But Coco had shown her results of test marketing indicating it had a reasonable chance to gain a minor footing. She had searched world-wide for the right place to bring it to the next step and had focused in on *Aussie BP*.

Robert told Jean how the deal was cancelled on the eve of its execution and of the strange message sent by terrified principles at the outlet. This was so outside the norm it seemed to indicate the work of a nut rather than something a large company would be involved in. Coco suspected an ultra-conservative religious group and hardcore Fascist ideologues as the source of the terrorism. From what Robert said, Coco was ready to go to all-out war with whoever it was. That was the Le Muffet will. It was strongly present in Claude—Coco’s father and Jean’s lover and business partner in the years before his accidental death at the construction site. His oldest son and daughter had ample shares of the fiery disposition and neither backed away easily from confrontation. She knew that Coco’s reaction would be exactly of the same magnitude as the terrorism inflicted on the people at *Aussie BP*. She would forsake all previous thoughts of enlarging her place in the fashion world if that was what it took to destroy her enemies—*That* was the Le Muffet way. Jean thought that if she could get there first and find out what was really going on, then she could intervene and possibly stop an explosion of ill fortune.

On the following day, Jean D'Soul *did* arrive at the offices of Aussie BP a mere thirty minutes before Coco. Sharon Burke and her partner Mark Cadden had each arrived for work only minutes before and were together in her office when the call came in from the receptionist. Both had slept very little the previous three days as an unimaginable situation had come to visit them. The face of the one Canadian man with his emotionally dead eyes had haunted Burke almost every time she began to fall off into unconsciousness. To hear her receptionist sound the name Jean D'Soul had a strange effect on her. It was like a sharp snapping sound that goes off unexpectedly and lifts one into a keener awareness. Jean D'Soul was a close friend of Coco Le Muffet—that was the first connection her mind made. The second was Jean's reputation throughout Europe as a patroness and generous critic in the world of fashion and design. While Sharon Burke hadn't met her personally, she had read one of the two books Jean authored on the subject of Design and Women's Psychology. She came out into the lobby and welcomed the French woman.

"Hello", Jean said brightly in her excellent English, "I'm a friend of Coco Le Muffet. She has mentioned you to me very fondly and I was hoping you would be available to speak with me at some point." Her voice expressed some embarrassment at having to be so rude as to drop by without an appointment. She added that the reason she was there had to do with concern expressed to her in a phone conversation by Robert Casoni.

Sharon Burke and Mark Cadden glanced at each other. "We should go into the conference room", he suggested. They each grabbed their cups of coffee on the way in and offered Jean some. This had come upon them before either had a chance to even get started on their coffee. "So you were sent by Coco?" Sharon asked.

"It was Robert who asked that I come", Jean replied. "Both he and Coco are so concerned with this situation that they are on the way over here right now. Coco doesn't know I'm here but I spoke to Robert ten minutes ago. They are driving in from the airport at this moment." Burke and Cadden squinted and looked at each other and at Jean. It took a moment to get all of this in order. "They're on the way over right now?" Cadden asked.

"Yes, apparently Coco has been very upset by all that has transpired in the last few days. She has worked so hard on the *Mary Made* line." Jean's hands came together over her bosom involuntarily. Her expression was motherly.

Tears welled up in Sharon Burke. "It's the same for us", she replied. "We've been so enthusiastic about *Mary Made*. But these men came here on Monday. They were Canadians from Montreal. And they told us that Montreal wanted the *Mary Made* contract between us and Le Muffet cancelled and that it was in our best interest to do so. They told us they were prepared to demonstrate their commitment to this right then and there. This awful man pulled out a large knife and held it to Mark's throat. They told me to cancel the contract right then and I did, I had to." Sharon Burke had been traumatized and was now crying. Jean came over and held her and said that everything would be alright. She asked her if they had contacted World Security about this.

"Not yet", said Cadden, who was traumatized as well by his partner's words. "The boss of the two men said that Montreal had informants inside our local World Security and that we should not even consider crossing them. After Sharon cancelled the contract with Le Muffet he said that all would go back to normal if we kept quiet. But that if we didn't then we would experience a great retribution. He said he could destroy our stores and our lives as easily as stepping on ants."

Jean was taken aback and somber. She hadn't expected to hear anything quite as serious and unusual as this. Canadian Mounters in Australia? It was completely unheard of. She now knew that her intuition to intervene in this matter was fully correct. She told Burke and Cadden to follow her lead when Coco and Robert arrived in a few minutes.

Robert had phoned Jean on the jet while Coco was in the bathroom putting on her business attire and doing her hair. Randi overheard this and now understood what was going on. He had been going through Little B's accessory bag looking for the cantaloupe-colored muscle shirt and wide suede collar the little pet would be wearing. Casoni didn't share any details of the call with Randi but told him that from here on out he should be very quiet and not try and inject himself into the conversation. Then he grabbed the special phone provided by Max and contacted "mate" to see if the security team was in place. "Mate" answered and told him they were on the job and that the principles at *Aussie BP* had just come into their office.

It had become a grueling flight on the jet. Coco slept in the recliner and Randi had made a bed for himself in the aisle using all the blankets he could find. Robert slept in his chair and had been the first of the three to get ready as they approached land. Little B had spent much of the time up in the co-pilot's seat. They had picked up a fresh pilot in Argentina who had been thrilled with the sumptuous dinner made by Coco which consisted of

eggs, cheese, fresh chilies and tomatoes, as well as a creamy sauce served with slices of steak. Little B had *Poodle Feast* stuffed with tiny steak chunks and squeezed into nuggets. When Coco emerged from the bathroom, the four of them came off the plane and headed for the taxi cab area.

At *Aussie BP* the receptionist walked them to the conference room where Sharon Burke stood at the doorway and welcomed her. They hugged and turned toward the interior where Coco was met by Jean who quickly took hold of her; “I had to come”, she said pulling Coco closer. “Robert called me. I couldn’t let you face this terrible thing alone”. Her eyes peered into Coco’s imploringly, offering love and pleading for forgiveness at the same time. She appeared stunned and Robert stepped up.

He introduced Randi to Burke and Cadden—they were already stealing glances at the flamboyantly dressed dog groomer. He said hello very politely and shook their hands. Then he gathered up Little B—now himself flamboyantly dressed in his doggy muscle shirt and wide collar. “I’m Little B’s personal assistant”, he added, trying to lighten the heavy atmosphere in the room. They petted the little white dog and commented on how well-groomed he was and on his perfect behavior—which they had noted on the two other occasions when they had seen him with Coco.. “He’s a very good dog”, Randi said. Hearing this brought light to Little B’s eyes. He liked it when people said he was a “good dog”.

The group took seats around the conference table. Jean quickly filled Coco in on the situation that had transpired at *Aussie BP*. The discovery that her enemies were possibly Canadian Mounters was shocking. It only could have been more so if they told her “men from Mars” were involved! A few minutes earlier she had been stunned to find Jean D’Soul there but in light of this new revelation, that had completely faded from her mind. She announced she would call her oldest brother in The Oakland once the night there had passed and that he would tell them how to proceed. Jean said all of this must be treated with great forethought. Word that Canadian Mounters had come to Australia to lean on a small company had all of the ingredients an international incident. She said she would call some close friends in Europe who could make subtle investigations that would put-to-sleep any suspicions that any of the major companies there were involved in this. The odds were very slim that anything like *that* was occurring. But it was something that had to be looked into. All of them agreed that they needed to contact local World Security but would let Maxim advise them.

“The men said they had people inside our local World Security”, Sharon Burke told them again. Robert replied that was almost certainly an idle threat. “These guys were either blazingly stupid or else they’re trying to pull a fast one. They have not only put themselves up against World Security, but also against the five crime syndicates. If they are truly from Montreal and they return there, they’ll soon have *real* Mounters and World Security hunting them. Wherever they go in the world, it will be the same thing.”

Of the world’s five crime syndicates, the Canadian Mounters were second in terms of age. They went back over 240 years to almost the beginning of the European settlement of the new world. Their domain stretched from Northern Canada all the way to Miami and included much of the continental United States and the Cuban Island chain. They had built their initial success by procuring Native American people to work as slaves. Their empire was slowly destroyed in the decades following The Last War as World Security began to take hold. A final campaign against them ended twenty years earlier on a tree in Manhattan City’s Central Park. There, nailed to the tree, the body of the last of the old time gangsters was found gutted with his innards sowed together and hung around his neck. A sign had been posted: The End. The last gangster was called, “The Little Advocate”. He had been their lead attorney as well as a promoter of *Mounter Values* among poorly educated youth. He had fallen in a mass slaying carried out by World Security extermination teams world-wide. Today, the Mounters and the other crime syndicates were relegated to control of drugs, prostitution and gambling. Extortion, kidnapping, hijacking, cyber crimes, blackmail and murder-for-hire were not allowed and the syndicates had a limited role like vice-lords, but within a huge set of restrictions. The position they occupied was similar to that of the fringe lion. They were allowed to exist for the purpose of fixing a specialized boundary.

A Canadian Mounter appearing in Australia would be equal in terms of public outrage to the appearance of a fringe lion in Central Park. Officials in Canada and Australia—as well as the two corresponding World Security Level One Administrators—would suffer great humiliation and be at risk of losing their jobs. If the media found out, all hell would break loose. It would produce days of fodder for pseudo journalists such as the scurrilous “Handy Andy” Blackbart whose methods were so egregious that critics would hold up his photo and just say; “‘Handy Andy’, is he a fraud, an incompetent, or an incompetent fraud? You decide!”



So the big question became, who had set these renegade Canadian Mounters—or imitators—in motion? Jean was sure they weren't hired by any of the large companies. Coco's *Mary Made* line was such a niche product that none of them had shown any interest. This was not a product for the mainstream clothing producers. Both Robert and Coco had suspected this was somehow tied to The *New Cristopian* Movement. As a prominent vocal supporter of their rivals, *Precepts of the Curriculum*, they had already begun to harass Le Muffet Enterprises.

While *New Cristopians* were an embarrassment to traditional Fascists, they had carved a support base into the working class and surrounding entrepreneurs that academics considered as intellectually lazy. The movement was based on a belief that Lord Cristo had originally come into the world with Adam and Evelyn and lived in a grand mansion above the Garden of Eden that was filled with great wealth, servants, and pet dinosaurs. Overseeing the development of Mankind from a distance, Lord Cristo eventually went out among people in order to lead them to greater material prosperity. None of this was in the original bible story but *New Cristopians* claimed that they had found additional pages from the true bible. In recent years, they had begun to embrace violence saying even if there was only one chance in a hundred that a non-flock member was actively in opposition to them, then they should be ready to take that person out by whatever means necessary in order to save the movement. The Fascist elite saw in The *New Cristopian* Movement a great new buffer against The Democratic Party, in elections.

After a long conversation with Coco, Robert and Jean, Sharon Burke and Mark Cadden began to regain confidence that things were returning to normal. Coco produced a document she had written stating that Le Muffet Enterprises would personally insure *Aussie BP* against criminal attacks against their five stores until the source of the problem was discovered and dealt with. Jean was quick to say that they could expect a great deal of sympathy from the Clothing and Design associations in Europe. *Aussie BP's* willingness to not cave in to thugs would become a badge of honor in Australia and abroad once the story slowly began to circulate. And once they had chosen the proper path to following in regards to World Security, the data would begin to flow on just who these men were and who had put them up to it. All that was left now was to reinitiate the shipment of *Mary Made*. Robert called Santa Barbara and woke up his warehouse manager instructing him to have the shipment sent out immediately.

So they finally went and checked into a hotel and everybody was very happy. Randi, seeing his partner at work, had never been so in love with Robert. He planned a special night for them.

Later, Coco got her brother on the phone and Max said he would talk to people he knew at World Security and get right back to her. He called Kerri Branghaue. After a big, faux apology to her for all of the commotion caused by "that excitable boy" Big-E White, he told her what had gone down in Australia and asked if she could suggest the right person to speak with. For Branghaue, hearing of this was like a cat waking up to find a mouse in the room that is pissing on the cat's food. "These types of things don't happen", she said in a hard voice and pledged to Max that they would have all of the details about who had done this and that they would take appropriate action. Max loved the way she said *appropriate action*. He thought whomever these fools were that had pulled this stunt in Australia, he was glad he wasn't them!

The shipment arrived at *Aussie BP* thirty hours after Robert had made his call. For the next five days he, Coco, Jean, Randi and Sharon Burke went about the five stores setting up displays. Coco, Jean and Sharon appeared on several local TV stations around Australia promoting the *Mary Made* line. Then it was time to return to their respective homes. At the airport, Coco, Robert and Randi saw Jean off.

The French woman held "her little Coco" for the longest time as tears streamed down the cheeks of the two. Jean had loved her since first setting eyes upon her when she was a little girl. She was so proud of the woman she had become. And Coco's faithful Robert too had become such a fine figure of a man. She was so happy that he had found love with the adorable Randi who she now regarded as the newest of her children.

After the long, return journey from down under, they finally returned to California where Big-E was waiting at the airport. Life had seemingly returned to normal for him—which is how he liked it. There had been no further talk about the exhibition Lion-fighting match with Ethan Vulerummer. Along with Max and Jimmy, Big-E had set the one million-dollar fee for his participation.

"Brick" Smith said that they would all just wait and see if Vulerummer became serious about it. In the meantime World Security would continue to look for holes and passages into and around his security. Max and him would announce their retirements after the first of the new year. At Los Grotto de Mirilla Agua, the entrance to the cave had been boarded up and all plans to go public with the discovery put on hold. In the front of their house, Big-E and Coco helped Robert and Randi transfer their luggage from one vehicle to another. A marked

World Security cruiser suddenly pulled up and two street level agents got out and walked up to them.

"Coco Le Muffet?" said one of the agents. She raised her hand and wondered what *this* was about. The agents served her with papers and drove off. She opened the envelope and looked them over. It was a lawsuit. The woman at the other end of the street was suing them because their dog Chica was pregnant. Little B was being named as the father. The lawsuit claimed Little B had broken into the house while the owners were away and had forcibly taken "our adorable Royal Sonoran Short-Hair, Chica, against her will".

Little B was being accused of having raped Chica and of impregnating her! Coco continued to read from the lawsuit—that was asking for three-hundred-thousand-dollars in damages.

"...as We, the owners of Chica, do not believe in the unholy action of abortion for our pets, therefore, We must submit to the stress and shame of bringing forth the offspring of the mongrel dog known as Little B. We advise that this mongrel dog be destroyed before it can inflict any further suffering..."

Randi heard Coco read this last part and became instantly inflamed. He began to charge down the street toward the people's house. Robert ran after him saying they would handle all of this professionally.

Coco was shaking her head, "that's the goofiest shit I ever heard Big-E, what you gonna do about this?"

"I'm going to call up Max", he said laughing. "This is straight funny!"

Little B watched all of this. He kept hearing them say, "Chica" and the expectation formed in his mind that he was going to get to have more "good dog time" at her house.

But this did not happen. Eventually the scene in the front yard of Big-E White and Coco Le Muffet's home in Santa Barbara played out. The bright and clear autumn day in Southern California fell into night. The two went to bed early and Little B was happy to be in his *Luxury Poodle Dog Bed* after a week of travel.

On the other side of America some hours later, a man woke up early after a restless night of sleep. His bedroom was a lavish suite in the very top section of the world's tallest building. The view from there was of the lesser skyscrapers of Manhattan City. Ethan Vulerummer stood before a large window and noticed a huge bank of fog moving toward him below. At first it didn't amount to much. His thoughts travelled back to the night before as he began to shake off the grogginess of sleep. He had decided to go for something a bit different then usual and had called out for Asian Style seafood and a "freshly-shaven Ti-boy". He'd sent the prostitute home early and hadn't slept well. Now he was awake again and gazing off at the bank of fog.

It moved quickly and was as dense as anything Vulerummer had ever seen. In no time at all it rolled up the crevices of streets below wrapping neatly around those tall buildings that were above its level. Soon, the bank of fog had divided the world below from the highest buildings which popped out of the glowing mass of mist like blades of grass in the snow. The sky was bright with a full moon and the effect of all of this left Vulerummer feeling a growing sense of isolation from the ground and all that went on down below.

He decided to drink some coffee, get dressed, and travel down his private elevator that ran the full vertical distance of The V Corp Building. He wanted to see that world below encased in fog. He would go to a round-the-clock sports bar and grill within walking distance. It was a good place to go where nobody recognized him. The place always had some kind of video playing of old and recent Lion-fighting matches. It was a good place to shake off the feeling of isolation. A good *Fascist* bar filled with good *Fascist* people.



